

PETANQUE - ITS ORIGINS AND FUTURE

Childhood memories of long summer days on the beach are brought back every time I see pétanque players or “joueurs de boules”. We were taught the game under the supervision of our Belgian uncles and aunts - all very dedicated players especially as the losers paid for the “aperitive” at a local café afterwards.

As children we’d play with wooden boules marked with a distinctive coloured band around the middle for each player. Much lighter than the steel boules used by the grown ups, they were pleasant to play with - far nicer and heavier than plastic boules that made their appearance a few years later.

We’d find a nice patch of hard sand, draw a line, throw the “cochonnet”, a small red wooden ball called a jack in English and start the game. Our enthusiasm knew no bounds and we’d play on, come chilly northerly wind, rain or glorious sunshine.

The aim of the game is very simple: each player tries to throw his or her boule as close to the jack as possible; the winner being the first to reach 13. Our cousins invariably won, we’d invariably lose and end up doing the drying up (as losers) of the supper dishes in their place.

HISTORY OF PETANQUE

From all accounts it seems that the game of “boules” dates back to the dawn of civilization as it seems that the first set of “boules” was discovered in Asia Minor (5,000 to 6,000 AC).

The Egyptians left behind a great deal of evidence of their love for games, namely in their religious rites. Marbles and skittles were part of their heritage; a set of skittles made of marble and alabaster and stone marbles were discovered on archeological sites (3,500 AC).

The Greeks made games into a real institution. In addition to the famous “discobolus”, marbles, skittles and guoits became very popular (in the game of “enkotylé), an upright stone is knocked down using boules.

The Romans inherited Greek games. The boule (“bulla”) was first made of stone, then box (buxus) which was to be known as “bocco” in Provençal dialect.

Gallic ancestors copied the Roman heritage and spheres of different weights and diameters were used. The term “boule” came about later, in the 13th century. Boules continued to be played during the French Revolution and during the French Empire. Elsewhere, variant forms of this game were being played: the British game of lawn Bowls and the Italian game of ‘Bocce’.

From the second half of the 19th century, regional forms of games came to surface: ‘La Rafle’, and ‘La Boule Lyonnaise’ to mention a couple. Rules were published, federations created and competitions started.

The first steel ball was made in 1927 at Saint-Bonnet le Château, a small village located west of St Etienne, in the department of the Loire, Rhône-Alpes region of France. Jean Blanc and Louis Tarchier, manufacturers in the village, registered the manufacturing principle for playing boules at the court of Montbrison (1929).

St. Bonnet le Château is the home of the world's two major boules manufacturers, La Boule OBUT and JB Petanque, and of the International Pétanque Museum.

In 1955, Frédéric Bayet, a lock manufacturer in St-Bonnet le Château, created the “OBUT” trademark. The fully-automatic production machines were designed by Antoine Depuy, a talented mechanic.

In 1958 the founders of the trademark called upon the Sauvignet family to expand the production which was to take on a whole new dimension.

In 1981, Robert Sauvignet became Chairman and Managing Director of the “OBUT” company. Today his son Pierre directs the company. OBUT is still the No1 manufacturer, holding 80% of the market, With a staff of just 130 salaried workers they manufacture 4,200,000 petanque boules a year; an incredible figure.

Boules Lyonnaise

The “Lyonnaise” became a recognized sport in 1850 with the creation of the first official club “Le Clos Jouve”. 1906 saw the foundation of the Fédération Lyonnaise and became called the National Bowls Federation in 1933 which in turn became called the French Federation in 1942.

This game is played with larger boules and over a longer distance. Although the principle is similar as Pétanque with pointers and shooters the rules are stricter. For example: when shooting you must nominate the target boule and land within 50cm for the shot to be valid.

The Game Longue

This game can be played on any surface, with the exception of concrete, asphalt or tiles. The terrain must be at least 25 meters long and the jack thrown at a distance between 15 to 21 meters away from the players.

Players take a running start of three steps before throwing the boule. This "run-up" allows the shooter to give the ball the momentum and force needed to reach the opponent's boule and knock it away.

The Birth of Pétanque

It is in Provence on the island of La Ciotat, located on the Riviera Coast between Marseilles and Toulon, where the game of boules was improved upon and became known as Pétanque.

One summer's afternoon in 1907, a game of boules was underway at the Béraud boules club. A free-style game (current Provençal game) was currently in play and surrounded by a great many onlookers keenly following events.

In the front row are a few veteran players seated on chairs hired out from Ernest Pitiot the terrain manager. These “ring-side” veterans pass comments, criticise, hand out advice, keep score or end up having heated arguments in the middle of the boules game.

One can only presume that on that particular summer's day, Pitiot had had enough of arguments and interrupted games for he decides to take all the chairs away. All except

one; the one reserved for his friend Jules Lenoir who was severely crippled by rheumatism.

As Jules Lenoir sits there, a boule rolls towards him. He cannot resist the temptation and joins in the game by throwing a boule too. Pitiot notices the efforts of his friend and comes up with the idea that Lenoir joins the game by putting his seat in the middle of the circle while the other players stand still with their feet together inside it. Pitiot also suggests changing the original circle to 50cm in diameter and the boule thrown between 5 and 9 meters instead.

In Provençal dialect feet together and stuck to the ground is called *ped tanca* or *pieds tanqués* in French. This new game, called *jeu de boules pieds tanqués*, rapidly became a favourite by all the locals and, just as rapidly, began to be pronounced *Pétanque*.

Such was the success of the game that in 1910 Ernest Petiot decided to organize the very first *Pétanque* competition; held on the original terrain where the game was invented.

The Fédération Française Pétanque et Jeu Provençal

Success and interest for the new game grew not only in Provence but further afield too. So it was that in 1927, the official *Pétanque* rules were drawn up.

A few years later, in the 16 January 1945, the committees of Basse-Alpes, Bouches du Rhône, Gard, Var and Vaucluse created the *Fédération Française Pétanque et Jeu Provençal* (FFPJP).

After the end of Second World War, an international tournament was set up in 1957 in Spa (Belgian Ardennes) with teams from six countries: Belgium, France, Monaco, Morocco, Switzerland and Tunisia. Once the tournament over the participants decided to create a worldwide body. In 1958, and now with the inclusion of Spain, the FIPJP was founded.

From those early days in 1910, *Pétanque* continues to acquire enthusiasts. In France alone there are over 460,000 official players in 7,600 clubs and 21 regional leagues and is presently being considered as an Olympic discipline.

Worldwide, the Federation has 43 member countries and is now the fourth most important Federation in France (after Football, Tennis and Ski)

And for those of you still doubting the seriousness of this game, the 43rd World *Pétanque* Tournament, La Marseillaise was held between the 4th and 8th July in Marseille, and attracted 4,000 teams, 12,000 competitors and over 200,000 spectators from all over the world

Christian Fazzino, considered to be one of the four greatest *pétanque* players, entered the Guinness Book of Records a few years ago with 992 direct hits from 1,000 shots in the space of an hour.

And the French government recently declared *pétanque* a "high-level discipline". This now gives its national federation access to government support and funds to build centres of excellence. Promising young players will be given money to help them to train

and study at the same time.

Pétanque: The Game

Pétanque is played on a flat hard surface 3 to 4 meters wide and about 12 meters long. At the start of the game, a circle is drawn on the ground where each player stands to throw his boule from. The game begins when the cochonnet (jack in English) is thrown. A proper cochonnet is turned from beech wood and between 2.5 cm and 3.5 cm in diameter. The cochonnet, generally painted red but can really be of any colour, is thrown between 6 to 10 meters, and must also be visible from the circle.

Interestingly, the throwing of the jack by one member of the team does not imply that he or she must play the first boule.

The team whose boule is closest to the cochonnet is said to be “holding”. Pétanque can be played anywhere; most players actually prefer an uneven terrain as it makes it more challenging and adds to the difficulty.

Pointers & Shooters

To point means to close in on the opponent’s boule with precision and place your own boule in a tactical position. This is commonly achieved by lobbing the boule. After hitting the ground, it should roll (hopefully) towards the cochonnet and come to a stop as close as possible to it.

Shooters on the other hand aim directly at an opponent’s boule. When properly hit, the arriving boule will actually replace the other one. It's a spectacular sight and known as a "carreau", the perfect shot. In triplettes (teams of 3 players) one will generally have an all-round player who is good in both pointing and shooting.

You can play one-on-one (called “tête-à-tête”), or in teams of two (“doublettes”) or three (“triplettes”). In triplettes, each player has two boules. In doublettes and tête-à-tête, each player has three boules.

Manufacturing la Boule de Pétanque

The making of a pétanque boule is an extraordinary process. It involves know-how, techniques and quite sophisticated and expensive equipment. To start with, pieces of steel (small cylinders) called “lopins” are cut from long cylindrical bars.

Heated to over 1000°C, the lopins are afterwards moulded into discs then into perfectly regular shells under 800 ton presses. The two shells are then soldred together in order to form a ball. This technique is used by all the manufacturers. VMS Plot (MS Pétanque) adds a stamp of precision and internal anti-bounce features.

After the all-important soldering phase (which determines sturdiness), the rough shape is heated to 850°C and slowly cooled to allow the exterior shaping to the determined diameter and weight, and also to add any lines or markings. The dipping and the "revenu" harden to steel and adjusts its toughness.

The finishing touches of polishing and adding anti-corrosive determine the quality of the final product and the pleasure in handling it. The “normal” balls goes through many different specialised, complex and ultra-modern machines, and undergoes numerous tests and trials.

Pointers choose a middle-sized weighted boule (72 to 73mm in diameter, and 710 to 740 gr in weight) with one or several marking lines.

Shooters prefer a completely smooth boule slightly larger in diameter (76 to 78mm) and lighter in weight (680 to 710 gr).

There is also an importance in the type of metal a boule is made from: Steel or Carbon. Carbon turns matte after a while and is easier to hold in the hand.

There are seven recognised French manufacturers: La Boule Obut, Boules JB Idéale, Boules Vannucci-Bucaro, Boules Elte, La Boule Noire, La Boule Bleue and Intégrale.